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A NEW ITALIAN DRAMATIC POET

WHEN, last winter, Italo Montemezzi's opera, "L'Amore dei Tre Re" (The Love of Three Kings) was produced at the Metropolitan Opera House, it was quite apparent that, however effective the music, much of the success of the work was due to the stirring dramatic poem provided by the librettist.

Sem Benelli—such was his name. Who was he? What else had he written? The libretto gave no clue. There was, however, a note to the effect that the "poema tragico" had been somewhat curtailed for musical setting, that the verses selected "had not been tampered with," save for a very few inevitable alterations and abbreviations, that "the poet" himself had also written for the music the words of the chorus behind the scenes, etc., etc. Such consideration for a librettist, as this note implies, is rare. In its way it stamped Sem Benelli as some one of consequence. But how many who listened to Montemezzi realized that they also were listening to a dramatist whose work has aroused extraordinary enthusiasm among the Italian public? For in Italy his name is coupled with that of D'Annunzio.

He has had at least seven triumphs on the Italian dramatic stage. If you look under his name in the card index in the Public Library, you will find three of his plays there in the original Italian, and one, "Cena delle Beffe" (The Practical Joke), translated into

French by Richepin, under the title "La Beffa." Of comment in English on the plays by Sem Benelli there appears, however, to be very little, the most important contribution on the subject being an article by Mr. Arthur Livingston in "The Nation" (N. Y.) Mr. Livingston writes that the reception of "Cena delle beffe" was comparable only to that of Rostand's "Cyrano" in Paris, while Benelli's latest triumph, "La Gorgona," (publication date, 1913) shows that whatever the limitations of his genius, the author surely has caught the secret of moving his contemporaries to a degree that few dramatists of the day have attained.

As a distinguished trait in his work the author's admirers point out in his verse a rhythm new to the tradition of the Italian classic stage. They credit him with recreating the eleven-syllable line, bringing it back to conversational reality and freeing it from artificial transpositions, and the shackles of conventionality. But, as Mr. Livingston argues, academic criticism is prone to refer to such technical causes phenomena that are really deeper and more vital. He thinks that if there be in Sem Benelli's poetry a naturalness hitherto lacking to the Italian verse drama, it is not merely a question of the position of a *cæsura*, but that his alleged superior naturalness must be due rather to a clearer view of reality itself. To present that view objectively may demand a modification of poetic convention.

But to isolate these superficial characteristics, which are not the cause but the remote results of his distinctive individuality, is not enough to lead to a sufficient appreciation of his art.

Then follows an able analysis of certain methods—one might say subterfuges—in Benelli's work: "To get a candid view of Sem Benelli, we must brush aside some of the fustian he holds out to his public and possibly to himself. 'No people,' he says in prelude to 'La maschera di Bruto' (The False Patriot), 'continues in legend the life of its ancestors as does the Florentine,' the Italian. The cult of the past is, in fact, one of the great motives in Italian life and letters; that is why Futurism is predominantly an Italian question in art, one extreme producing another. Sem Benelli means to avail himself of this interest in ancient things. He lays his 'Love of the Three Kings' in the times of the barbaric invasions. His *Rosmunda* harks back to Belisarius. The Medicean court of the Renaissance suggests two of his plays; academic life of the sixteenth century another. And now his 'Gorgona' utilizes memories of mediæval Pisa. I say utilizes; for in the 'Gorgona,' as in the other plays, the rôle of history is merely that of a device. It lends probability to various mechanical assemblings of situation out of which emotions may be made to spring. It arouses a sense of vagueness, abstracting the audience from the pressure of immediate associations."

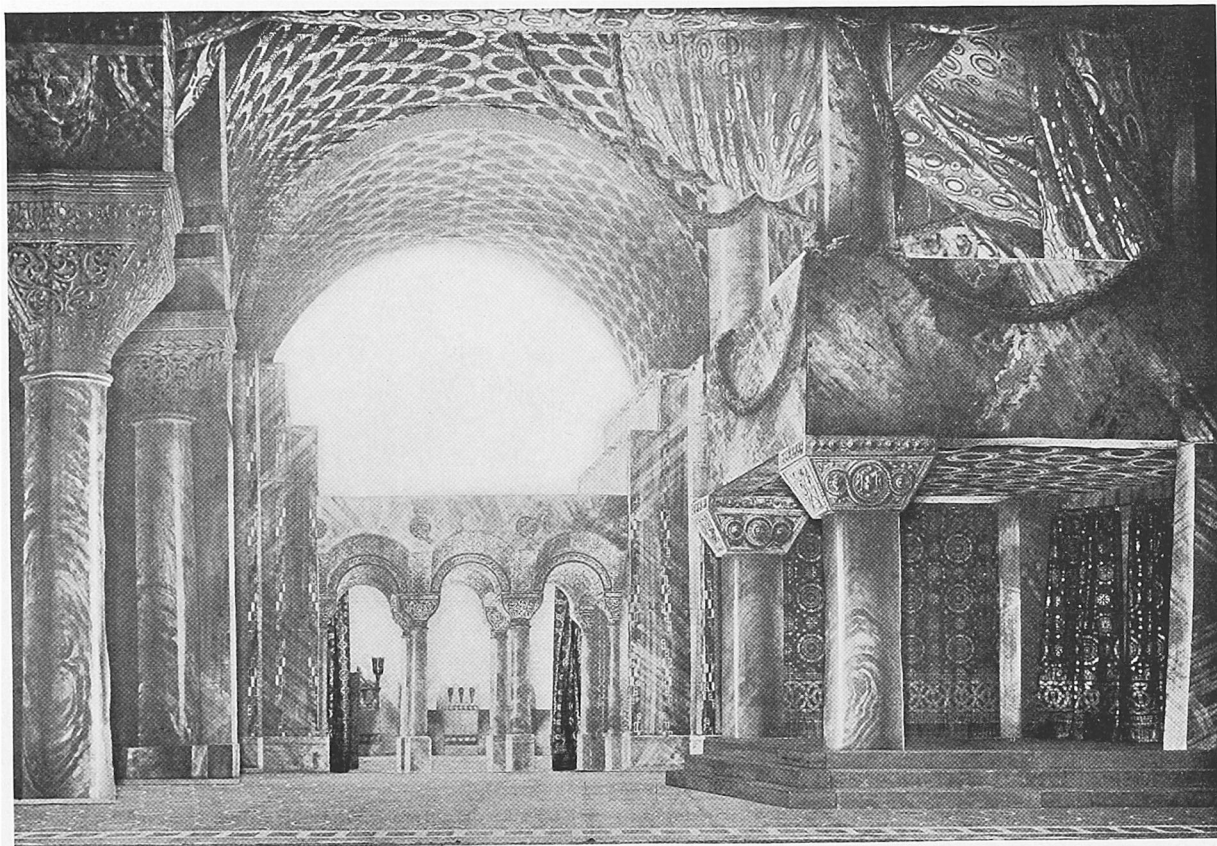
According to "The Nation" Sem Benelli, if he were frank with himself, would admit that to what is not real in his constructions he gives the mask of reality by submerging it in the hazy

atmosphere of the past, an atmosphere as hazy as possible. For in none of his plays does he raise an historical question, or reintegrate an historical figure. "Not even his *Lorenzino* requires the author's assurance that 'he has lived in his spiritual companionship'; for no one cares, artistically speaking, whether *Lorenzino dei Medici* was a false patriot or not." In brief, Sem Benelli's history is a pose and "in this phase of his work he illustrates an hypocrisy common enough in contemporary Italian art to furnish a pretext for the Futurist revolt."

And since the words "art" and "poetry" are frequent on Sem Benelli's lips; since he is proud of his "*mesta poesia*," that lingers so willingly around love and death, that strikes, indeed, a note of yearning melancholy here and there, let us also note that it often struts with an air of self-consciousness; that in it there is much fustian; that his love-making never rises above romanticist banality; that his expression of passion is followed by the customary expansion of it in imagery of the flower, the star, the dream. In the "*Mantellaccio*" (The Comedians) in which Sem Benelli's pose as well as the limitations of his verse become most apparent, the Novice, a fading echo of *Cyrano*, wins *Sylvia*, who recalls *Roxane*, with the sincerity of his poetry, thrown into contrast with the academic drool of the *Ardente*. Yet what does Sem Benelli achieve but to substitute the platitudes of neo-romanticism for the platitudes of the Seicento, when, as quoted by Mr. Livingston, he says to the Emerald mask: "Well I know the silent palpitation of thy fair green, the living image of the placid life that is born of



“Love of Three Kings”



Designed by Edward Siedle,

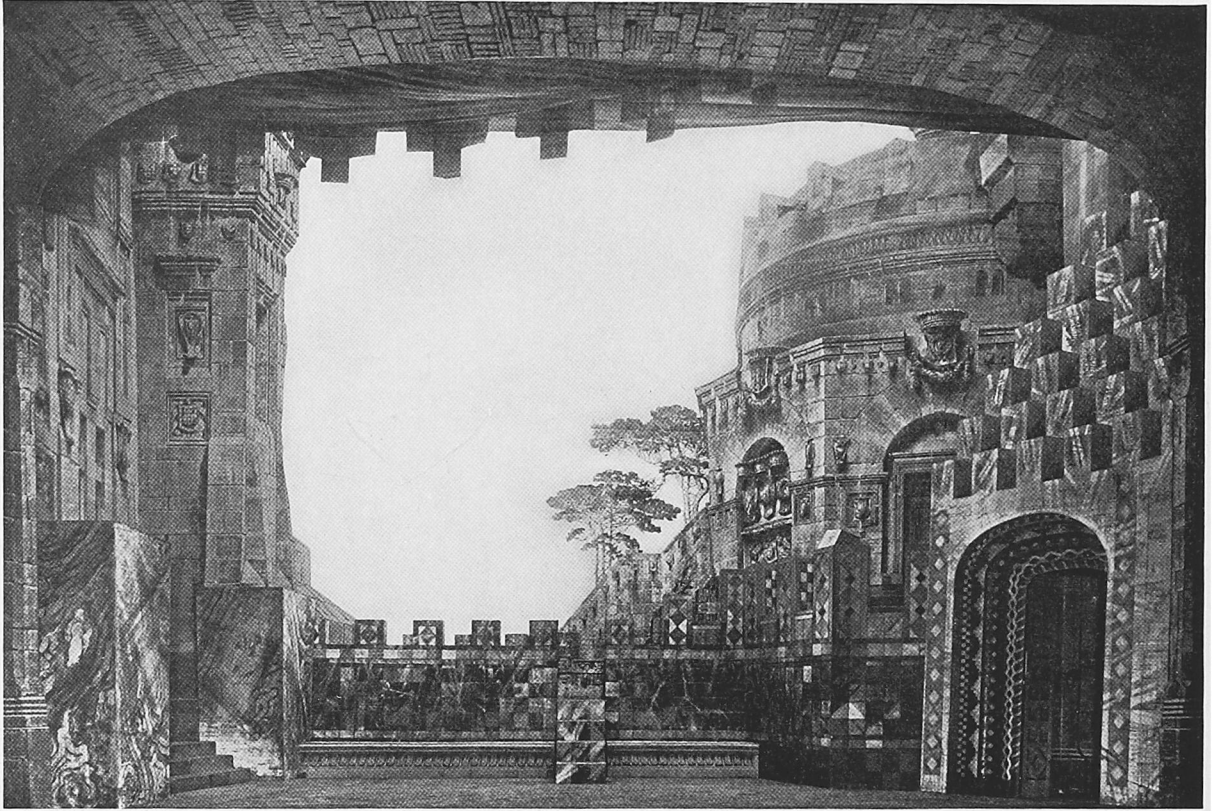
"Love of Three Kings" Act I

Technical Director, Metropolitan Opera House.

dreams from mountain top to deep of sea. Thy garb of emerald recalls to me the joy of my freedom, when, lost in the open fields, I followed my own fancies, forest birds that forever eluded me, and I found the infinite charm of jewels like unto thyself and thy companions. . . .” Or Lamberto to Gorgona: “Oh, let me leave thee, let me leave thee with my lips’ thirst quenched with the warm fragrance of thy breath. Thy kiss, thy kiss, oh dear one, is now more sacred than the limitless love of all that lives. . . . Thou smilest more sweetly than the isle that bears thy name mid the waves of the tempest. . . Oh the infinite, inexhaustible caress of thy wild voice, thy torrential voice, thy voice of night, thy voice of prayer. Thou didst sing to me thy burning love: it awakened me, it soothed me

to sleep. . . .” Yet, though every schoolboy in Italy may have been doing this for a century past, there exists the tendency in a public that has known a Carducci and a D’Annunzio, to ratify the journalistic pæans which herald in such work the rejuvenation of Italian verse.

Mr. Livingston, in his study of the poet, finds that if there be one serious attempt at psychological analysis in his work, it is in the Giuliano of “La Tignola” (The Bookworm.) Let us follow his argument. Here is a case of the proletarian who has read too much; before the mind of a book-store clerk unfold the glorious visions of Socialism and revolution. On the back of a politician he rises within reach of power. At the crucial moment when he is called upon to make a hypocritical

*Designed by Edward Siedle,**"Love of Three Kings" Act II**Technical Director, Metropolitan Opera House.*

campaign speech, his flight fails. "For you" says the Duke to Giuliano, "I am an adventurer. I spur you to action. I urge you to overcome certain scruples, certain sickly reluctances. And you accuse me of insincerity. I will tell you one thing: your uprightness is a poor justification of your weakling's soul. You like the small, the insignificant, the cosy nook by the fire with the musty odor of books, the painful sacrifice, useless precisely because performed in the dark. You abhor the spotlight, you prefer to gnaw away in obscurity. On that puny background, on the background of your bookstore, you, like so many others, appear heroic. You made a mistake in leaving it. It was your natural element."

Sem Benelli has an interesting problem here: what are the psychological

restraints that confront the "academic" temperament in the struggle with affairs? There are in this play a variety of situations, of which Mr. Livingston has given the Duke's interpretation; adding, most aptly, that that interpretation should have come from Giuliano himself. The only modern subject in Sem Benelli's plays, as well as his single prose production, the "Bookworm," has been also the least successful. It lacks the distinctive element in Sem Benelli's special power.

Benelli, however, knows the stage and its effects. If it is daring to kill the heroine in "The Love of Three Kings," he surmounts the difficulty "in the figure of the blind king, whose uncanny determination to discover the lover of his son's wife sustains interest to the end."

We will let Mr. Henry T. Finck, the



Designed by Edward Siedle,

"Love of Three Kings" Act III

Technical Director, Metropolitan Opera House.

music critic of the "Evening Post," tell the tragic story.

The three "kings" who give the opera its title are Archibaldo, a mediæval feudal lord, head of a band of barbarian invaders who have taken possession of an imaginary part of Italy called Altura; his son, Manfredo, who has married the native Princess Fiora, who does not love him; and the man she does love, Avito, the Alturian Prince who has been bereft by the invaders of both his throne and his fiancée. In the first act Archibaldo, though blind, discovers that Avito has been making love to Fiora. In the second act Manfredo has returned from a military expedition, but soon is obliged to leave again. He gives Fiora a scarf, begging her to wave it as a farewell from the battlements. While she is doing this, Avito once more appears. She begs him not to tempt her any more, but his passionate pleadings finally weaken

her and she yields to his embraces. Again Archibaldo appears on the scene, and this time she does not deny her guilt; whereupon, in an excess of fury, he strangles her. In the last act her body lies in the crypt of the chapel, surrounded by flowers and mourning women and men in white. Seeing Avito approach, they hastily withdraw. He kisses Fiora's lips and instantly feels the effect of the poison that had been put on them by Archibaldo to trap her lover. Before he dies, Manfredo also appears. "Avenge yourself!" cries Avito; but Manfredo, believing in his wife's innocence to the end, also kisses her lips, and Archibaldo enters to find his son dying.

The one weakness of this tragic poem—and a serious one—is that there is not sufficient action for a three-act opera; but what plot there is constructed with consummate skill.